New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1957

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"The Rope Dancers"

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Rope Dancers"

New York Post

November 21, 1957

TWO on the AISLE

By RICHARD WATTS Jr.

Tragedy of the Hapless Daughter

"The Rope Dancers" is so earnest and conscientious a play that it seems even more than ordinarily ungracious to add that it lacks the skill and forcefulness which might have given proper emotional intensity to its frankly unpleasant subject matter. Morton Wishengrad's drama, which opened last night at the Cort Theater, has the advantage of several excellent performances, and it isn't the sort of commonplace work one can dismiss scornfully, but it unfortunately emerges as a courageous try rather than a powerful and purging achievement.

Possibly only Eugene O'Neill could have taken this particular material and, by the strength of his monumental theatrical drive, given it the desperate tragic sense it demanded. Lacking this feeling of deeply brooding emotions in ambush, the emphasis of Mr. Wishengrad's patently sincere play is inescapably on the unpleasantness of its central situation instead of on its potentialities as moving, haunting tragedy. I think the spectator is more likely to be upset by what he is seeing than filled with pity and terror through dramatic insight.

What "The Rope Dancers" is attempting to dramatize is the tragedy of an Irish-American couple at the turn of the century, whose daughter has been born with six fingers on her left hand and later falls a victim to an ailment that seems to be St. Vitus' Dance. Because the husband was once a carefree roisterer, who had slept with another woman on the day the child was conceived, the mother is convinced that it is all a punishment from God, and, believing the guilt was also on her own soul, she has grown bitter and cruel.

It is to the credit of Mr. Wishengrad that he never seems for a moment to have selected such a subject for its shock values. And it is a tribute to his conscientiousness as a dramatist that he never permits it to get out of hand and become either merely sensational or conducive of embarrassed laughter. I believe it is impossible not to respect "The Rope Dancers" and its author. But it also seems to me that only in rare moments does his drama take on the quality of emotional enrichment that transforms the clinical into the tragic.

The Neighbor

Mr. Wishengrad has various incidental victories. He has written the role of a blowzy and friendly neighbor, whose determined efforts to be helpful to the sullen mother are constantly being rebuffed, and, not only does Joan Blondell play it with warm and humorous skill, but the author has given her a part worth working on. Throughout the play, there are stretches of admirably sensitive and understanding dialogue. Yet I cannot help feeling that his work fails to rise to the demands of its pathetic theme with the needed cumulative force.

Siobhan McKenna again demonstrates her emotional skill as the mother, although the role impresses me as being a bit too hesitantly developed by the author. Art Carney, hitherto known chiefly as a television comic, is strikingly real and moving as the scapegrace husband, and Theodore Bikel is, as usual, extremely effective as a sympathetic doctor. There is a convincing portrayal of the daughter by Beverly Lunsford, and Barbara Ellen Myers is just right as the neighbor's child. Peter Hall's staging and Boris Aronson's set are helpful. But "The Rope Dancers" doesn't quite work out.

"THE ROPE DANCERS"

Play in three acts and five scenes by Morton Wishengrad; staged by Peter Hall; designed by Boris Aronson; costumes by Patricia Zipprodt; presented by the Playwrights Company and Gilbert Miller at the Cort Theatre, November 20, 1957. The cast:

Lizzie Hyland . . Beverly Lunsford
Margaret Hyland . . . . . Siobhan McKenna
Moving Man . . William Edmondson
Mrs. Farrow . . . . . Joan Blondell
Clementine . . Barbara Ellen Myers
James Hyland . . . . . Art Carney
Lameshnik . . . . . Joseph Julian
Cop . . . . . Joseph Boland
Dr. Jacobson . . . . . Theodore Bikel

Daily Mirror

November 21, 1957

ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE

'Rope Dancers' Just Misses

Morton Wishengrad, a highly successful TV scripter, made his bow as a Broadway dramatist with "The Rope Dancers" at the Cort Theatre Wednesday evening. His first work for the Main Stem is something of a reflection of his years spent penning material for the airwaves.

His writing is terse, he wastes no words, and he's fashioned excellent roles for first-rate players to score with. His drama is, in our opinion, too concise, and too brief in running time. But you cannot enjoy the luxury of fully developing characters around the studios, where every minute counts, where there must be time for commercials even when tragedy is afoot.

WISHENGRAD IS concerned with a dour, hard-working mother, separated from her erudite, ne'er-do-well husband. It seems that their child, born with six fingers on the left hand, and become an 11-year-old neurotic because of it, has placed an emotional gulf between them.

The mother is certain that the blemish is a result of the daughter's having been conceived when the father came home from a spree. She nurses the idea that the mishap is somehow a punishment for her having submitted to her drunken husband's embrace. And her guilt complex is such that the child is a victim to it.

A kindly doctor undertakes to set things straight by amputating the extra finger, only to have the overly sensitive youngster die of what was probably nervous shock. After all, medicine and surgery were in a rather primitive state at the turn of the century. Anyway, in the end, the wife realizes that her brilliant, though erratic, spouse, has been the more innocent of the pair.

"The Rope Dancers" takes its title from Nietzche's "Thus Spake Zarathustra," for the daughter skips rope to overcome attacks of St. Vitus Dance. She is a symbol of the thousands who, in their bewilderment, danced madly to death in the mid-Europe of the 14th Century.

Under Peter Hall's evocative direction, Siobhan McKenna gives her finest performance over here as the strait-laced, repressed mother. It is burning in its intensity. Art Carney, making his local stage debut, proves the dramatic find of the season, as the father, glib-tongued, learned and improvident. Here is bravura acting with heart.

JOAN BLONDELL stands out vividly as an amiable, sluttish neighbor. Theodore Bikel turns in another of his excellent characterizations as a philosophic medico. Young Beverly Lunsford is touching, indeed, as the nerve-wracked, frightened daughter. And there are helpful contributions by William Edmonson, Barbara Ellen Myers, Joseph Julian and Joseph Boland.

Boris Aronson has designed a fittingly drab tenement apartment.

The Playwrights' Company and Gilbert Miller have every reason to be proud of having sponsored Wishengrad's first play for the theatre. It has moments of tenderness, beauty, eloquence and even earthy humor. It has dramatic drive. But it is, we fear, too sketchy and depressing for a completely satisfying evening.

Make no mistake about it, Wishengrad is a playwright to watch. He knows how to write for actors. He can etch people to the life. But he has yet to learn how to capitalize on them in terms of sheer theatre. He soars toward the stature of tragedy, only to settle for a less than felicitous melodramatic flight. In sum—no, with sincere regrets.

The New York Times

November 21, 1957

Theatre: 'Rope Dancers,' a Dark Idyl

Play by Wishengrad on Stage at Cort

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ALTHOUGH "The Rope Dancers" is small, it is all gold, and it is beautifully acted at the Cort Theatre, where it opened last evening.

It represents the first Broadway play by Morton Wishengrad, a radio and television writer. Taking as his subject a man, a woman and their daughter at the turn of the century in a New York tenement, Mr. Wishengrad has written a dark idyl that explores the labyrinth of the human heart and perhaps illustrates a Nietzschean view of life.

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When the curtain rises, Mrs. Margaret Hyland and her little daughter are just moving into a fifth-floor tenement. As soon as the moving man has gone, Mrs. Hyland locks the door and hopes to keep the rest of the world away. Literally, the story is little in scope and plain in character. Mrs. Hyland is trying to escape her shiftless husband, whom she blames for the deformity that keeps her daughter a pariah. For her daughter has a sixth finger. They both regard it as such a monstrous symbol of shame that they conspire to conceal it.

That is the situation. Ultimately it is resolved, tragically. But Mr. Wishengrad is really interested in the torments, the fears and the denials of human beings caught in a cosmic fury they can neither resist nor understand. If "The Rope Dancers" had a contemporary setting, the author could hardly avoid the psychiatrist's method. We have terms for these terrors today.

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But Mr. Wishengrad's method is that of a poet who is emotionally involved in the agony of his characters. The distinction of "The Rope Dancers" is the vividness of the portraits of the people and the environment—the implacably cold mother, the surface charm of the ineffectual husband, the desperate daughter, the warmhearted slattern who lives downstairs; the bored and irritable truant officer; the weary but conscientious neighborhood physician.

Since Mr. Wishengrad is not a fluent writer, his play is bare and rigid. He cannot pull away from it far enough to look at it objectively. But his method of personal involvement results in glimpses of the human heart so direct and lucid that some of them are almost unbearable. They are tempered by a compassion that goes beyond these few agonized people to the human race.

"The Rope Dancers" is eminently actable. In Peter Hall's meticulous, understated direction, it is magnificently played by admirable players. Boris Aronson has set it in a worn tenement that has already seen too much suffering; and Patricia Zipprodt has provided costumes that portray character with remarkable insight.

In the part of the mother, Siobhan McKenna gives an inspired performance that makes all her previous appearances look like apprentice work. She is naturally a magnetic actress; there is always a cadence in her voice that is attractive. Everything she is and knows she has put at the service of this proud but wretched woman whose coldness is really passion, whose poise is really hysteria. It is a sensitive and understanding performance by an artist.

But all the actors have been stimulated by the clairvoyance of Mr. Wishengrad's play. In the part of the amiable father, Art Carney may not be speaking all his lines with the subtlety of phrasing that has been written into them. But his charm, tenderness and homeliness are winning. As the blowzy woman who lives downstairs, Joan Blondell gives a wonderfully exhilarating and at times affecting performance.

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Theodore Bikel's lumbering, tired, modest, knowing physician is superb. And Beverly Lunsford gives a remarkable performance as the overwrought, eager, loving, panicky daughter. If there were time, a good word should also be said for the acting in other parts by William Edmonson, Barbara Ellen Myers, Joseph Julian and Joseph Boland.

For Mr. Wishengrad's compact play has stimulated everyone. There is not a false stroke or an empty space in the performance. "The Rope Dancers" makes the theatre look like a palace of truth again.

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

November 21, 1957

'Rope Dancers,' a Grim Drama, Wins Audience but Loses Critic

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Morton Wishengrad's drama, "The Rope Dancers," which opened last evening at the Cort Theatre, is a serious work which is expertly written and admirably played.

The audience was intent upon it throughout, and at curtain-fall it gave play and actors genuine and long applause. But, as one member of this audience, I must report I was not greatly moved.

It is rather a grim play centering on the tragic life of an 11-year-old girl. A summary of the circumstances cannot do justice to the warmth and insight of Wishengrad's writing — but, just or not, the circumstances are these:

The girl's father is a wastrel and a poet, and wife and daughter left him long ago. The mother, a seamstress, has put all emotion out of her life, including any motherly fussing over her child. If any child ever needed love, it is this one, for she is unbearably shy because she has six fingers on one hand and is working up to a case of St. Vitus' dance which ultimately will kill her.

Fine Friend Below

The period is the turn of the century and the locale is a New York tenement into which mother and daughter have moved. The father seeks them out and is rebuffed by his estranged wife. Warmth and affection are at hand on the floor below, which is inhabited by a fine big slattern of an Irishwoman, her dirty-faced and normal little girl and, one assumes from sounds which come up from below, a tippling head of the household.

These roles, and some subsidiary ones, are carefully written and most excellently played. But always I had the feeling that it was the author who was in charge, and not the characters. He was moving them when they should have been moving him—and so they didn't move me. I think it was John van Druten who said that, soon after he began a play, the characters themselves took charge and finished the work for him. In "The Rope Dancers," Wishengrad remains in command.

A Fine Company

The Playwrights' Company and Gilbert Miller have given the drama all the advantages they can summon—a good setting by Boris Aronson, understanding direction by Peter Hall and a fine company.

Siobhan McKenna plays the seamstress with cold intensity, and Art Carney makes a fine contrast to her in the role of her glib, charming, warm-hearted and no-good husband. Real warmth comes onto the stage whenever the tenant from the floor below comes up—Joan Blondell, as hearty and messy a woman as you ever saw.

Beverly Lunsford does an admirable job as the eleven-fingered tot, and her large assignment is an emotional one throughout. There's a cheerful bit by Barbara Ellen Myers as Miss Blondell's daughter, and an excellent portrait of a neighborhood doctor by Theodore Bikel.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
November 21, 1957

FIRST NIGHT REPORT

WALTER KERR'S REVIEW

'The Rope Dancers'

"THE ROPE DANCERS" is an intensely earnest, intensely acted play about people whose emotional responses are always in excess of the facts.

At one point in the second act Siobhan McKenna stands poised and trembling on a tenement window-ledge, five flights up. She is so terrified it will become known that her only daughter was born with six fingers on one hand that she is ready to plunge to her death if the truth is shouted. Art Carney, garrulous and high-spirited father of the child, is so hopelessly feeble in any and all crises that he can only sit slumped in a rickety chair wringing his hands. The child herself, wan and wretched, is so disturbed by the havoc she has wrought upon those she loves that all control vanishes, her arms and legs flail wildly, and she falls in convulsions to the floor.

It is something of a tribute to author Morton Wishengrad's stubborn sobriety and savage determination that the scene holds. But Mr. Wishengrad's symbolic study of human deformity suffers, I think, from the same sort of excess he imposes on his characters.

He is, to begin with, unwilling to let us like them very much. Siobhan McKenna, her mouth drawn close in a tight, withered, contemptuous smile, turns venomously on her neighbors and violently upon her husband whenever a generous hand is stretched out to her. Her daughter's "shame" is what she lives and feeds on; no one must tamper with this carefully nursed sore.

Miss McKenna is prepared, with honesty and some dignity, to rap out every cold and cutting insult the author has handed her: if Mr. Carney makes a plea for forgiveness, she reminds him that their child was conceived on a night he'd come home drunk, and from a brothel; if slattern Joan Blondell offers her a friendly cup of coffee, she drains it immediately and arrogantly into the sink. The performance is straightforward, direct, controlled. But we are given so little insight into the harrowing beginnings of what is now a misshapen soul, so little in the way of homely sympathy, that we can only wonder why anybody offers this rigid woman anything, let alone love.

Art Carney, lowering himself down a fire-escape and bounding into a home that doesn't want him with a rococo flourish, is similarly willing to make every defeated gesture that is asked of him. His zest for a blathering, pseudo-poetic ne'er-do-well is very nearly contagious: he has great fun testing the intelligence of a truant officer who has come for his sadly warped child. Yet Mr. Wishengrad will give him nothing but weakness, with which to win us. Even the blarney is suspect; to the end, he is something less than a man.

The grim insistence that we face only the sorry truth about sorry people infects every side of a hopeless puzzle: the girl herself, beating her father's shoulders with furious fists and shivering with fright beneath a blanket, is an unyielding sparrow from whom the warmth of life has long been drained. Only Joan Blondell, as a hearty slattern from the flat downstairs, is allowed a beaming, booming good nature; Miss Blondell plants her hands on her hips and makes the most of it.

But there is still another excess to be dealt with in the theater. Each of the play's small, symbolic actions mean more than they say. The six-finger embarrassment is, at one time in the evening, equated with being a Jew. When, at long last, a doctor (very well played by Theodore Bikel) simply cuts the finger away, the child dies. Perhaps man cannot live without what he considers—or a mistaken society considers—a deformity? The questions are big ones. The incidents on which they rest are too slender to carry them plausibly, to make us believe that the issue of the moment is also an issue of much greater moment.

Mr. Wishengrad writes of ugliness, of ravaged and unattractive people, with considerable integrity. What he does not do is make us care for the stricken figures who inhabit an ambitious—indeed over-ambitious—fable.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun
November 21, 1957

Girl's Pathos Slays 'Em All

By FRANK ASTON.

Many went to see Siobhan McKenna. And some for TV's Art Carney. And others for that lovable gal, Joan Blondell. Any one of these superior performers would have been worth the trip to the Cort last evening. What came of it? We went away from "The Rope Dancers" salty with tears over an 11-year-old named Beverly Lunsford.

Of course, it was the Wishengrad text, in the first place, and on top of that it was the sure touch of director Peter Hall. And probably, in calm analysis, it was the skill of her elders; but in a news sense this Lunsford child killed the lot of us.

There's nothing popular in the Wishengrad drama. It exerts its appeal exclusively on those with a stomach for the cruel, the surgical, the ugly. Playing with humor through its early passages, it rises at last from a kitchen-style savagery to a spiritual beauty that awaits some who learn through suffering.

What you're likely to remember is brutality: A man slapping his wife to the floor, the wife tearing away her clothing to confess that in her chilled, hygenic heart she is no more than a prostitute.

Your reporter, born with a splendid tract where the feelings flow, found it a superior stimulus. But he will understand if the next fellow finds it revolting.

Mr. Wishengrad tells of a father, mother and daughter existing in New York squalor around the century's end. The futile father was born to "follow the curvature of the earth," the mother to exemplify "godliness by virtue of soap." She cannot understand why her kind of people—the strong — are respected while his kind are loved.

Their child is withheld from the joys of girlhood, her hand always hidden in a mitten. The hand, so the daughter is told, is punishment for something worse than blasphemy. It has six fingers.

From the little girl's wretchedness, from the purge of the mother's distorted heart, from the recognition of the decency in the father's weakness issues a balm to soothe the wounds that ensue from a gentle doctor's tragic failure to adjust the child. It is less a narrative than a mood. (Rope dancers, by the way, go through life on a tight rope.)

The playing is strength itself. Miss McKenna, she of the strong voice and impressive carriage, furnishes the splendor expected of her. Miss Blondell, Art Carney and Theodore Bikel (the doctor) are deeply touching. Sets and lights fit.

Journal-American
November 21, 1957

Finely Written Play's Motivation Obscure

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE ARE TWO preliminary statements I feel obliged to make before proceeding with any consideration of "The Rope Dancers," which opened last night at the Cort Theatre: (1) I thought it was just fine and, (2) I don't understand it at all.

This new play by Morton Wishengrad certainly contains some of the most forceful and compelling writing we've encountered in several semesters; his scenes are sustained, his people have dimension. The performances are prodigious.

But I came away from the theatre in a state of total confusion. A child is born with six fingers on one hand—that I can fathom—but that this should induce the psychopathic fandango that follows is beyond my ken.

The wife blames the husband, who had been drunkenly wenching on the day of the child's conception, and her dour indignation has remained with her ever since. The little girl, quite understandably, prefers her gentle and erudite old man to her stern mama.

In the final chukker, when the wife reveals that her normal yearning for her husband has merely been suppressed, the offspring dies. What does this prove? (Don't call us, we'll call you.)

Tenuous Wire

Siobhan McKenna has a tenuous wire to walk in the role of the mother. She comes onstage meaner than anybody this side of "Look Back in Anger" and it is a long time before we discover what's eating her. In the meantime she manages wonderfully well to hold our interest through the sheer force of her performance. It is a most unsympathetic and challenging assignment, and she is brilliant.

Art Carney, the fugitive from Jackie Gleason, reveals himself as a big, serious actor. As the kindly weakling who has fathered the unhappy tot, he is poignant and appealing. He has done some sneaky experiments with drama in the citronella circuit, and here it pays off.

The most rewarding part in the play is that allotted Joan Blondell, the heart-of-gold neighbor, and she scores consistently. She has almost all the laugh lines, and she is one character that I understood all the way.

Beverly Lunsford, the sprout, seemed to me to be inaudible at times, but this did not detract from her very capable gyrations in the clutch.

Theodore Bikel was a devout and dedicated Jewish doctor, and Barbara Ellen Myers a hoydenish daughter to Miss Blondell. Joseph Julian had a notable interlude as a truant officer.

It is frequently difficult to assess the contribution of the director, but in this instance I should say that Peter Hall had turned in a precise and contemplative job. Boris Aronson's single set of a two-room tenement is bleak and believable.

"The Rope Dancers" is an absorbing evening in the arena. If I missed the message, don't fear. I am still waiting for Godot.

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